



Citizens' Guide to Measuring Performance in Government

For the past several years, governments at all levels in the United States have increasingly been using performance measurement as a powerful tool for communication, management and decision making. More and more jurisdictions understand the importance of measuring how well they are doing, and many of those jurisdictions are sharing their performance information with the public in an effort to be accountable and transparent.

So, what does that mean for citizens? How can you interpret the information provided? Where do you find it? What do you do if the information is not, or appears to not be, provided by your government?

This Guide sets out to de-mystify performance measurement in government and help citizens answer these important questions.

Why Should I Care If Government Measures Performance?

As taxpayers, we expect that government at all levels, local to federal, is doing everything it can to ensure it is delivering the most effective services possible at the lowest possible cost. But how do we know if this is really happening? Performance information provides governments with an extremely powerful tool to get this done for citizens. Some of the reasons performance measurement matters include:

Ability to drive long-term change. Government agencies and jurisdictions that set long-term goals with specific performance targets can change things in ways that are valuable and important. Which goal is more likely to get the best results – one with a specific performance target done by a specific time (such as reducing the crime rate x% and by x-date), or one that offers platitudes (“we will be a world-class public safety organization”)?

Improved performance. There’s something to the old saying that “What gets measured, gets done.” Performance data provides leaders and managers at all levels in government organizations with the ability to understand where performance is lagging and to focus on improving it – and to not just stay busy with “business as usual.”





Budget decisions that protect priorities. Information about how well a department or program is performing changes the discussion around the budget resources for that department or program. The budget is not just about the money and how much of it each agency can get – it's about the performance citizens should expect to receive as a result of the money they provide. Governments who do performance budgeting can connect a level of funding with a level of expected performance: "With more funding, I should be able to get my building permits more quickly, etc." With these tools, governments that are cutting budgets can make decisions about what is most important and what levels of performance they want to maintain. New budget dollars can be tied to improvements in performance.

Be accountable and transparent to citizens. What's the crime rate in my section of town? How quickly can I get my building permits? How efficiently is my government providing services? Governments are increasingly sharing performance information, particularly via the internet, so that citizens can answer questions like these and more.

How is Performance Measured?

There are different methods available for governments to measure performance. However, most will focus on, or at least include, these four important categories of measurement:

Results. This is the "So what?" part of performance measurement: so what difference did the government's service make? Results measure changes in the community (positive or negative) as a consequence of services provided by the government organization. Examples of Result measures include things like: the crime rate, community disease rates, street conditions and customer satisfaction ratings. Results are the most powerful and important performance measures available to government, as they capture the impact of the services they provide. Although more governments are focusing on Results, unfortunately it's still not that common for Results to be a systematic part of available performance data. Governments which are measuring and reporting results to citizens are on the front end of the accountability and transparency curve.

Outputs. This is the "What did we get?" part of performance measurement. Outputs measure the service effort put forth by the government organization to achieve change in the community. Examples of Output measures include: how many inspections were performed, how many permits were issued, and how many people attended our training classes. Output measures tell managers if they are meeting their targets for delivering their services to the community. Output measures are the most common in government and, while useful, need other performance information along with them to provide context and a bigger picture view of how the government is performing.





Demands. This is the “What level of service will the community request or require?” part of performance measurement. Demands measure the amount of services that the community is expected to request. Examples of Demand measures include: how many children are in need of immunizations, how many people are eligible to vote, and how many referrals for services are expected. Demand measures help government organizations think ahead about how to best use its resources to meet the demands of the community. This helps reduce gaps between the services available and the demand for a particular service in the community as the community changes over time.

Efficiency. This is the “What does it cost?” part of performance measurement. Efficiencies measure the expense (in money and/or other resources) of providing a service, like trash removal or foster care for children. Examples of Efficiency measures include: the average expense of an EMS (think Ambulance) response, the average expense to change the oil in a Police vehicle, and the expense of community park maintenance. Efficiency measures give managers and leaders valuable information which they can use to help properly fund programs.

How to Find it: Where is Government Performance Data Commonly Available?

On their website: As government organizations provide more services and information via the internet, it is also providing more data about its performance.

Some of the best-managed and transparent governments may have a portal (or link) to performance information right on the front page of their website. If this is the case, it’s likely you will be taken straight to the government’s performance reports. This is one of the most transparent ways governments can share performance information with their citizens. Particularly strong examples of this include:

City of Austin, Texas – Their performance measures and performance data are online in a searchable database, so it’s easy to pull up the performance information you’re most interested in. You can see the measures at:

<http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/budget/eperf/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.MAIN>

Metro Nashville, Tennessee – Their online “Citizens’ Guide to Metro’s Performance” provides access to performance information on *the Mayor’s Priorities and on key departments*. You can see this resource at:

<http://www.nashville.gov/finance/strategicmgt/cgmp/>





There are also common documents where performance data may be available. They include:

The Budget Document. For jurisdictions using performance information as part of their budget decision-making process, that performance information is often included as part of the budget document so the relationship between funds and performance can be more clear. Even jurisdictions that do not use performance information to help make informed budget decisions will often have at least some performance data – usually Output measures – as part of the budget document.

Example: Los Alamos County, New Mexico, which includes performance information with each department's budget page. You can download their departmental budget pages at:

<http://www.losalamosnm.us/omb/20112012BiennialBudget/05DeptSummaries.pdf>

Department/Agency Annual Reports. Many organizations publish an Annual Report, and these may include some annual performance data.

Example: The Fire Department of the City of Omaha, Nebraska, publishes an Annual Report that is filled with detailed operational data. You can download their 2008 Annual Report at:

<http://co.douglas.ne.us/omaha/firecms/images/stories/PDF/2008ofdannualreport.pdf>

Performance Reports. Jurisdictions with particularly robust performance measurement systems may share their performance data in performance reports. These can range from periodic reports (monthly, quarterly, etc.) of performance to Annual Performance Reports that are formatted for ease of use and readability.

Example: The City of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, publishes a Performance Report twice per year. You can download their year-end 2009 performance report at:

http://www.okc.gov/finance_tab/lfr/lfr_year-end_fy09.pdf





From jurisdiction to jurisdiction, these documents, or direct information about performance data, will be found in different locations on the website. It is not common for governments to publish their performance information so that it's very visible, so it may take some looking. Some good places to begin your search include:

For local government: The page(s) for the Mayor, Council, or Board of Commissioners or City/County Manager.

For state government: The Governor, Legislature or Budget Office Pages of specific departments (Budget/ Finance, Health and Human Services, Police, etc). Some organizations have a specific department dedicated to Performance or Strategic Planning.

Search: Many government websites also contain a "search" feature which you can use to help find specific documents. Searching "budget" will generally pull up the most recent budget towards the top of the page. Searching "performance" should also pull up documents or locations within the jurisdiction's website where performance information may be found. The same is true for "strategic plan," which should pull up the most recent version of strategic planning and possibly performance related documents.

Tip: Use specific years or department names when searching to help narrow the results.

In hard copy: So what do you do if the above documents are not available on the website or prove too difficult to find? The best option is to call or email senior leadership – for local government, your local City or County Manager's office or a Mayor, and for state government the Governor's Office, – and request to be sent performance information. Here are some examples of questions you can ask:

"I'm interested in learning more about how my government uses performance information and would like to request a copy of the most recent Strategic (or Strategic Business) Plan and Performance Reports."

"I'm interested in understanding more about the operation of the "X" Department. Will you please send me any performance information for this Department?"

"I'm interested in how my government is using performance information to inform the budget process. Will you please send me the most recent budget document?"





Understanding the Data:

To help illustrate performance measurement and management in government, consider the following fictitious example: The Fire and Rescue Department of Gotham City wants to measure data about their Fire Trucks. They want to ensure they're providing the best possible results for the people of Gotham City, who depend on the Fire and Rescue Department to respond to emergency fire and medical requests.

One common Result measure is response time – that is, how long it takes the Fire trucks to get to the scene once they are dispatched. The average response time for last year to the various parts of Gotham city might look something like this:

North Gotham – 5 minutes, 12 seconds

South Gotham – 8 minutes, 2 seconds

East Gotham – 5 minutes, 47 seconds

West Gotham – 4 minutes, 12 seconds

Clearly, the folks in South Gotham are not getting the same Result as the rest of Gotham City. Citizens could use this information to ask questions about why this is occurring and to advocate for more effective Fire and Rescue response. Gotham City could use this information to ask those same questions and take action to improve their performance.

(The same analysis by city and area of the city can be applied to another Result often used to measure Fire Department performance: % of fires contained to the room of origin.)

An Output measure could be "Number of responses to calls for service." This measure communicates the level of service provided. If you look at this measure over time and see that the output has been increasing – that is, that there are more calls for service – that could influence discussions around their budget, for example. An increase in responses may indicate an increase in demand – the related Demand measure may be "Number of calls for service expected to be requested".

Also, let's say the Fire and Rescue Department decides to track some Efficiencies. These could include: "Cost to maintain truck type A" and "Cost to maintain truck type B". In this case, both trucks have similar functions; they carry the same number of firefighters, can connect to a fire hydrant, and carry all the same equipment. The difference between them can either be the company that manufactures them, the model number, and/or the year in which they were made. By tracking these costs, Gotham City may find that they can replace a less efficient truck with a different one to save money.





The above data makes it possible for the Fire and Rescue Department to track, analyze, and report performance and stay relentlessly focused on their goal to provide the best possible results for the people of Gotham City. While each measure is useful, there's real power in looking at the data collectively to form a more complete picture of the department's performance.

The above data also makes it possible for citizens to review the Fire and Rescue Department's performance and gauge how the performance has changed over time in relation to how the budget has changed over time. Citizens can be and stay informed!

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